

Kurram Valley- February 2014

Thursday 20th February 2014. Thall Scouts Officers Mess.

It is almost midnight, sitting in the Sazo guest room of the Thall scouts, the room is named after a post, it is a small room the smallest I have stayed in the Frontier Corps in last two years, light is dim probably working on generator but a small electric heater is working and giving its red glow, weather is fine not much cold, although it drizzled in the evening. I came almost three hours ago and it seems a long story but it is important to give a back ground of the past months. I myself is amazed that only a full moon ago I was in Virginia, America for a month and spent the new year there with my friend Reena and now sitting here in Frontier but honestly even while there my heart was in frontier because the thrill and excitement it generates cannot be matched by the peace and tranquillity of America.

There is a peace talk going on with Taliban while it was in embryo stage it has been sabotaged by the killing of 23 frontier Corps troops by the Bajaur chapter of Taliban headed by a Khurassani and it has not only sadden every Pakistani but also created a wave of anger. Two important events have taken place in frontier, first is the coming to power of pro-Taliban government of Tehreek Insaaf led by former test cricketer Imran khan and second is the killing of the Taliban leader Hakimullah Mahsud few weeks ago in a Drone attack. Equally important is the assumption of army command by general Raheel Sharif in a peaceful transition of command from general Kayani who was expected to bring something out of blue to prolong his stay in the office. Another sad but important event has been the disastrous Sunday two months ago when a explosive laden car blew itself at Bannu garrison while the convoy was getting ready for move towards the Miranshah. This was very unfortunate as I have stayed and travelled in the same convoys and twice travelled in civilian hired vehicles. It has been a common practice to hire a civilian vehicle for transportation and none ever paid any heed to the fact that it can be blown up but these Taliban have always been a step ahead in creating ripples and so far military is simply following or adopting reactive measures and who knows what next is in store, may be poison in the food or water which si also bought from open market or a civilian worker or taxi driver blowing himself in the mess vicinity , there are too many loop holes you cannot sit behind a fort and be cutoff from the daily chores these things are bound to happen and it is only in strong retaliation against Taliban which restores morale.

Kurram Valley.

I first came or travelled in Kurram valley in 1985 when Russians were still in Afghanistan and my regiment had one battery deployed ahead of Parachinar in ack ack role. Major Ibrar was the battery commander and Captain Sami Khan was the permanent officer here because he was pathan and only one to spoke Pashtu thus he stayed here for maximum period. I was a lieutenant then and I took a public transport from Sargodha and reached Kohat and from there I once came in the Hiace having a front seat and wearing jeans and jacket. The most vivid memory of that journey is the long road which connects Thall with Kohat, it had trees on both sides which were providing the shades or had the entire road wrapped under their shadows , similar scene was re-enacted short of Sadda where the wagon had a stop for I think half an hour. I was mentally scared but the environments were very favourable, majority of population was afghan refugees and as such they had good views about army. Our camp was ahead of Parachinar in an area known as lady Roberts garden, I was perplexed on the name but years later I came to know that it is named after the wife of General Roberts who commanded British army in India in

1883, incidentally it was today that I read again the Three Campaigns in Afghanistan written by General Robert's son who himself as a lieutenant took part in the Second Afghan War of 1878, a classic in every sense, the style and content is simple but very appealing.

During my stay at Parachinar, I was fascinated with the area and the beauty apart from an inherent enjoyment of war which every subaltern enjoys and looks forward, I would dream of shooting down an Russian aircraft because all I had to do was to press the electric button and all eight guns would have fired simultaneously, it was wishful thinking because these 57mm Chinese guns rarely fired in synchronisation even on ranges. I think I had an opportunity once when two Russian gunships appeared on the horizon overhead Teri Mangal and fired few flares and then couple of rockets over the city, our range meter indicated that these are out of our 6000 meters range thus I took few photographs and that was it. Russian jets usually would cross the salient there by violating our airspace for few seconds and for this precise issue our battery was deployed. War was fun then, no tension main issue was the mines which reportedly Russians had thrown in the area or planted by their agents on the road and track thus our almost daily sojourn to and from Parachinar Mess was an ordeal with nerves all the time expecting a blast but I think only few occurred but it was just like having a fear of snake, 17 Punjab was in the Parachinar. Captain Sami and myself once drove towards Teri Managal and climbed to Peiwar Kotal on the army jeep and that scene is also engraved in my memory, as we were driving up we halted at a wood cutter hut, he had two Kalashnikovs hanging on a tree and was busy in his work; he was mentally and physically ready to confront the Russians in case they attack him. Lemon grass was another popular item, it is a herb and an excellent tea is made with it full of lemon aroma. Another hot item was the Russian air conditioner which were making their debut, they were costing Rupees 2000 and yet people were bit reluctant in buying them but slowly and gradually they were gaining a good reputation. I bought one shot gun from Sadda a Russian make which had engravings of rabbit on one side and dog on other side, it was priced at 1800 rupees. Why I am narrating all this is because this is what the mood was then, war was taken as a leisure and nothing serious about it. I came to know that sectarian rift is very high in Parachinar and few times when I went to bazaar, I was shown the Shia imam bargah and the sunni mosque both in close proximity to each other but again nothing very serious about it. I also once travelled on the narrow gauge train which used to run between the Thall and Kohat. Today I just saw its remnants. When our battery was ordered to move back, we had an incident, one of the soldier simply lost his rifle G-3 at night. He was sitting on top of the truck which was heavily overloaded, it seems unfortunate that military move was not taken seriously, our luggage had increased much when we came because now we had the extra wood with us which we had used to make the living bunkers and we intend taking it along, anyway we came to know about it at Kohat. It will not be out of context if I admit that I drove Unimog all the way at night from Parachinar to Kohat and I had very little driving experience ten, my driver just sat with me and I think he was praying all the time for safety but military culture was such that he could not refuse.

I was the only one who was least pushed about the loss of rifle because I was too naïve and young to understand the gravity of the event but my battery commander and commanding officer knew it thus a plan was formulated in which a new rifle was purchased from Darra Adam Khel an Iranian G-3 and I was task to carry out the last act of it; to destroy the newly purchased rifle at Sargodha by placing it under the rail tracks and then to announce that the rifle has fallen down from the soldier as train was being shunted. In reality the rail could not destroy or run over the bolt group and just dragged it. This was most unexpected and we had to resort to the hammering to distort the numbers on it. The background to all this was that in 1979 regiment had lost one rifle while sentry was on duty at Sargodha and legend goes that the then commanding officer Hanif Soomar a career officer developed a heart disease due to the interrogation of special investigation Board. This remained our well-kept secret for

over two decades but as all official papers are made public after twenty five years thus I think it is ok to narrate the incident.

22nd February 2014-0530 hours.

Fajr prayers call is in air and this is what one misses in western civilisation, the official way to start the day, unfortunately it has been years since I have offered my fajr prayers but the call is sweet and one feels like getting up and walking to the mosque to offer the prayers but I know despite all this conviction I will still not go to the mosque; one day I will.

Yesterday which was Friday, I had gone early to the offices of the Thall Scouts and by early I mean 0945 hours, today I was not stopped by the sentry at quarter guard as he did last night {Thursday} office block is rather a new building, all around the paint work was under progress on the adjoining structures. Met Major Kalim the adjutant he is from 13 lancers and as such quite hospitable and accommodative. Commandant Colonel Salman had gone to the brigade headquarters for some briefing, I had tea and more tea, weather cloudy with light drizzling and chilly but still pleasant or at least this was my perception while sitting in adjutant office. An hour later, adjutant got the call from his commandant to get the troops ready for some action. One major of SOG came and adjutant briefed him, the body language of the major was not very comfortable and he raised few issues which adjutant had no answer like, how much is going to be the duration of the likely operation? Should I take luggage and bedding? And so on, he left the office without shaking hands, not a good sign. Few more officers came but overall it was relatively calm. I in my experience with FC now knows that nothing will move without the consent of commandant but in meanwhile I slowly prodded the adjutant regarding the availability of data on history and was pleased to know that some work has been done and new commandant is also interested in compilation of history. Tae again came along with biscuits since I did not had a breakfast thus I finished the plate of biscuits by dipping them in tea. Till 1730 hours I remained seated in adjutant's office waiting for the commandant to come back, by this time the ice was broken and I had few documents to glance around, the superintendent seems to be a good person and he did produced a 1955 Standing Orders which was a revelation even to the adjutant. Much of the data about any corps lies in its standing orders and especially in FC therefore it is of absolute importance to have a copy of it. It was almost torn infested with vermin yet readable, few more drafts of the history all repetitive of each other. One interesting document was a 1962 insurance copy which the Thall scouts had in that period, all history drafts highlighted that Thall Scouts had moved out from the Thall Fort in 1951 and acme back in 1954 but this insurance paper was addressed to the commandant Thall scouts at Fort Salop. In reality the Thall Scouts came back in 1964 to Thall Fort and not in 1954 but most likely the figure 54 was misspelled for 64 and as such every subsequent draft simply copied it. Adjutant in my presence went through his file and admitted that he had not seen it in totality thus we actually opened few sealed envelopes few dating back to 1959 and 1960. The general discussion in adjutant office in which I was primarily a listener ranges from cribbing against the system to the ongoing trial of former army chief. One young intelligence officer Captain Imran also came he is also from armoured corps 38 or 39 but from Lieutenant Colonel Ahsan Kayani's unit, he is reluctant to go on a course as he had just got the married quarter but now he had lost all hopes of his course being dropped and as such now mentally ready for move a pleasant personality, another officer which impressed me was a captain of SOG who kept on wearing his battle fatigue mainly because troops area also wearing it.

Commandant acme back in his office at 1800 hours, I had a cup of tea with him and same plate of biscuits, he is from 21 Horse and had a good war experience by commanding his regiment at Swat, Bajaur and in North Waziristan, in fact he drove the tanks to Razmak on their own gas, the very first

feat of such nature. I saw his regiment war souvenir, a highly decorated regiment, later he served in Saudi Arabia for over three years and now in command. He is mature and looks like a commandant.

I had an early dinner my first meal in the day, mixed vegetables and an omelette followed by a cup of coffee in the mess ante room. The ante room had undergone one major change since I came here last almost a year ago and that is the addition of book shelf. It is very comfortable now to read in the mess and credit goes to present commandant. My room which is small had an electrical malfunction in the morning but it was rectified now, the availability of warm water is a blessing. I went to sleep early and now I am typing the history draft.

Thall Scouts were raised on 1st April 1949 at Thall Fort, it was the first scout's corps to be raised after independence and as such enjoys a unique position among the Frontier Corps. There was already a wing strength comprising of Tochi Scouts deployed at Thall Fort which was stationed since March 1948; mainly to protect the line of communication between the Kurram Valley and Tochi Valley, it was boosted with a company strength from South Waziristan Scouts and elevated to the status of a one wing corps mainly to act as reserve to Inspector General Frontier Corps. Major Sanaullah of SWS was the founding father. In 1952, Thall Scouts moved to Fort Salop in Khyber Agency and returned back to Thall in 1964; reason being that in 1952 the army itself again occupied Thall Fort. Thall Scouts took active part in both Indo-Pakistan Wars of 1965 and 1971. It was in 1981 when the Thall Scouts were elevated to three wing composition when newly raised Kohistan Scouts stationed at Spinwam were amalgamated into the Thall Scouts along with raising of one more wing to give necessary manpower; Lieutenant Colonel Sardar Khan was the first commandant. In 1983 a medium battery of Mahsud Scouts was incorporated into the Thall Scouts and fourth wing was added in 1999 with the command structure raised in 1990 to have a colonel in command; Colonel Nusrat Abbas was the first commandant. It was in 2013 that Spinwam Fort and area was handed over back to Tochi Scouts. Thall Scouts is actively participating in the ongoing war against militancy, all in all over 103 Thall Scouts have laid down their lives in the course of duty since inception. Thall scouts have participated apart from the wars in almost all major operations of Frontier corps ranging from Kalat, Bajaur, Zhob, Darra Adam Khel, Darel Valley, Orakzai, Kurram, North & South Waziristan to Force Command Northern Areas.

On raising the strength was 16 platoons comprising of Yousafzai, Khattak, Turi, Orakzai and Afridi tribes, in 1961, two platoons of Orakzai were transferred to newly raised Bajaur scouts thereby reducing the strength to 14 platoons, in July 1969 the strength was reduced to 13 platoons mainly due to amalgamation of one Khattak platoon with headquarter company and raising of pioneer platoon. In 1973, one platoon of Orakzai was transferred to newly raised Mohmand Rifles; presently corps have 44 platoons of nine tribes.

The very first operation Thall Scouts undertook was in May 1959 when the complete force proceeded to Kalat and remained deployed in Khuzdar and Zehri area, aim was to suppress the hostiles and to facilitate the army in operation against the Kalat State. Three officers, 24 junior commissioned officers and 529 other ranks took part in the operation. From Kalat, the contingent moved to Dir & Bajaur states in September 1960 and it was on 4th March 1961 that contingent came back to Fort Salop which was the home base then; three officers and 400 troops took part in this operation.

On 31st March 1971, almost complete Thall Scouts less one company proceeded to former East Pakistan to restore law and order in the province, troops moved by train to Karachi from where they were transported in ship and reached Dacca on 9th April 1971. Their main task was to defend the key installations against the nefarious activities of Mukhti Bhani. They were initially deployed at Rajendurpur ammunition depot, telephone factory at Tungi and weapon factory at Ghazipur. By end May 1971, Thall Scouts were moved out with one company each at Comilla, Sehlat and Chittagong; to establish border posts; in October 1971 the wing was consolidated at Sehlat area where it fought the

war collectively. Some pitch battles took place at Maulvi Bazar, Akora Brahan Bari, Shamser Nagar, Zake Gank and Atgram, all in all 33 scouts of Thall Scouts embraced shahadat and further eighteen were missing believe Shaheed and 23 were wounded. The events of 1971 War are a sad chapter of our 'military history, the remaining troops of Thall Scouts also surrendered along with the rest of army and were repatriated to Pakistan in 1973-1974. Thus for all practical purpose the Thall Scouts were non-existent in this period however the unit entity was retained and it remained at Thall Fort with minimum strength of one company.

22nd February 2014, 2000 hours, Mess lounge.

Waiting for the dinner, waiter has announced rather informed me about the menu, it is Aaloo-Qeema, the mess does not prepare lunch rather dinner is the only main meal of the day, reason is that the tea breaks are so heavy that there is no need to have lunch and furthermore the working hours are very late due to operational commitments thus hardly any time for lunch.

Yesterday's conference and late sitting has resulted in the early morning arrival of Cobra gunships at around 0700 hours, I was still in my room when the distinct and morale boosting noise of Cobra blades flapping echoed through the valley. Naib Subedar Sher and Naik Rasheed the photographer were at my room at 0830 hours as it was planned yesterday; for a change I was ready beforehand. We first drove towards the Kurram Piquet which is located on the southern edge of the fort approximately two miles away having direct visual contact with the fort, it is on a higher ground, rather it is on the southern saddle of the same ridge on which the fort is constructed. For half an hour we were mesmerised by the gun ships flying low and the unmistakable noise of Cobra's Gatlings firing. The view and scenery was fantastic, lively and almost mesmerising, from the elevation, it was a peaceful scene. I got the bearing from my old compass, the fort almost faces north, with Thall town on north – north west, a high ridge in north which had the scouts firing range but it is no more under use due to prevailing environments, the bridge over River Kurram on the north west which further traverse to the south west towards the Shewa and Spinwam. The tomb on the western side of the bridge stands out due to its dome, down below there is almost half a kilometre of fields which separates the river from the piquet{ river flows almost hundred yards away from the main fort}, these fields were all green, on inquiry it was narrated that this is wheat season. Immediately on the south south west of the piquet is a small mud habitat which is off afghan refugees. In south the area is plain and a confluence of local stream and that of River Kurram, to be more precise the whole fort complex is lying on a ridge between the two streams both joining with the Kurram River.

Piquet itself is not very impressive, it is not like the Mirza piquet of Landi Kotal or for that matter even those of Drosh fort. I have no idea and neither anyone else have any as to what happened to the original structure, it is almost impossible to think that it has been demolished or stolen but then there has to be an answer as to what happened to the actual high citadel; probably it never was in that shape. I vividly remember that I came to Thall in 1993 on a Alouette helicopter with Captain Rizwan, Brigadier Ashfaq Kayani was the brigade commander and we stayed a night here, later in the morning I had gone on a visit to the piquet which was more compact and I was really impressed but then I think it was not this piquet but probably Kohat Piquet was the one which I went inside. Coming back to present, the general knowledge of the subedar about the area was rather sketchy, they did not know the exact names of the surrounding villages and streams. The usual hospitality was there, a small tea break having tea and biscuits along with dry fruit on the roof of the piquet, I just wondered about the piquets in North Waziristan like Amin where it is almost suicidal to sit outside. I inquired about the fire raids on the fort and piquet and it seems that not much has come this way apart from few sporadic rockets which did not cause any damage. There is a frontier constabulary fort on the western side of the river which had borne the brunt of attack in one incident. The usual layout of the ground is interesting, what differs it from North Waziristan is in terms of greenery and open spaces, in other manner the habitat is similar with high watch towers in almost every village ranging from one to several, to use the term

villages is confusing because all in all there are two major population centres across the river stretching south west on a ridge and almost every third house had a watch tower. The Afghan village down the piquet despite having all houses made of mud had one fortified watch tower. Through binoculars, which were rusty and it seems rarely used, I observed the village, it was peaceful with smoke billowing out from few houses indicating food preparation. The eastern side is again similar with few fields spreading out before the stream and then mild ridges and beyond them a vista of mountains and mist. Gunships kept on coming for refuelling and replenishment and created a stir in the overall environment, I saw many men sitting in the fields just observing these birds of prey. These gunships do arise the morale of own troops as it was obvious from the faces of these scouts. After the slaughtering of fellow scouts who were prisoners with Taliban such heli-attacks are more of necessity if the morale has to be checked in going down. An hour later we bid farewell, oh I forgot to mention that photographer soon left us as he was called by the commandant

Dairy farm was our next destination, it is situated on the south west of the fort outside the main building. Quite large in size with a prominent old grand tree, the structure is old as old as the fort itself or may be few years younger. There are over a dozen buffaloes, half a dozen mules and equal number of donkeys on charge, cleanliness was obvious, even the water in the trough for animals was so clean that one could use it as a mirror. I just ask about the Ferrier and came to know that there is none in the corps, how do you then shoe the animal was my next query which took the staff off guard and they had no answer, luckily the vet doctor came in who is nothing more than a compounder but respectfully called doctor by the scouts, every wing have one such veterinary compounder, he confessed that they have not shod the animals because there is no qualified person in the corps. From dairy farm we drove upward through it, following a shingle track, coming into the family quarters of army units onwards to the another old structure, all area outside the fort is under army brigade control, less the fields which are property of Thall Scouts. Peaceful and clean are two words which can describe the environment, if one overlooks the approaching helicopters. Cocktail lounge is the name of this old structure which is like a mini fort by itself having one really old wooden gate, I have no doubt that this gate is original in nature, reluctantly I entered, inside it is quite spacious with two typical bungalows of colonial era, only new thing was the two car sheds. It is under use of the assistant commissioner, it is not easy to retain such old building by the civilian officers' right in the heart of the army brigade, because to army this structure can fulfil many tasks like acting as guest rooms or residence for brigade major. We then drove towards the railway station, it is presently being under the use of Christian community, outside there is a small children park in which few children were playing and watched by their mothers sitting on the walls of the park. This Christian community is certainly at the lowest ladder of the social acceptance yet the magic of life is such that one finds them enjoying the holiday in same fashion as the higher echelons do; children enjoying the sun and mothers talking and enjoying the same heat. There are still notice boards of by gone days like parcel office, the standard railway benches and grill are all intact. As we drove, I notice a small plaque on a stone, on closer inspection I found the brief history of the railway station and that of railway line itself. Kohat was linked with the rest of the country through railway link in 1902 and after two years the Thall was also linked with Kohat with a narrow gauge railways. There was a railway service on alternate days, the journey time was five hours thus it necessitated the parking of railway inside the fort in case of any breakdown. The railway station itself was adjacent to the southern wall of the fort, there were three main classes of railway carriage, the first, second and third class¹. This service remained in vogue till 1985 when it was abandoned mainly due to financial reasons, unlike Khyber safari it was never revived.

¹ Imperial Gazetteer Provincial series North West Frontier Province, 1905, pp.54-55.

I had a break in the mess charged my camera and then an hour later at 1145 hours I went out again with Naib Subedar Sher, we now headed towards the JCO Mess, it was locked but soon the man came with the key, it is very neat and clean almost as good as an officers mess, then I went to see the information room which again is very clean, I am really impressed, the most striking thing is the free tea available to the troops in information room, it is on self-service basis, instead of usual chairs, the arrangements are made of cushions and carpet with ash trays and spit bowls, which are necessary for niswar. There is a imambargah also, a mosque, a library under construction or rather expansion. Quarterguard was the next stop, it was constructed in 2000, a sole scout was doing slow march on the road, obviously on punishment, three scouts unarmed were on guard with fourth one carrying a rifle, I have failed to understand this logic. We still regard quarter guard as more of ceremonial rather than as the first one to react to any eventuality. In the mess lawn the number of peacock have risen to almost dangerous number, I counted no less than a dozen of them, white, grey and the standard blue coloured. Ducks, pigeons and few cranes are the other members of this community, not to forget the deer, hen and rooster. All of them were enjoying the sun shine, lying, playing, contemplating and a pair of duck had the guts to made love openly, it lasted for just couple of seconds but I was able to record it on my video camera. In the evening while I was lying in the room, the barber came, god knows who told him to come but he came and I reluctantly had a haircut, he was quite keen to trim my moustaches but I successfully evaded him.

It is almost 2200 hours and the adjutant and rest of troops have not yet arrived back from the morning operation.

24th February 2014. 1930 hours, Thall Mess.

Just had a plate of so called Biryani, not much of difference between it or if you simply just mix rice with curry, last two days had been rather hectic, if not for me than for the Thall Scouts. Day before yesterday when they went out for operation, everything went ok, it was only yesterday afternoon when I went to the office area that I came to know that one soldier of Thall Scouts had been killed due to accidental fire while weapon cleaning was in progress, it puts everything else on low gear out of which history compilation is the last thing on anybody's mind other than me. The Scout was 27 years old, he was born in 1987, enrolled in 2008, was married but had no children so far and he belongs to a village in Orakzai. I came to know all this because I was sitting in the adjutant office when all this conversation took place between Major Shafqat and host of people on other end of line, there were three more wounded casualties. A helicopter came, Major Arsalan who was with me in 5 Squadron was the pilot along with Captain Kayani. Arsalan was very courteous and it was his attitude which compelled other to take more notice of me, which included a glass of juice as well. At times I feel very awkward and embarrass to sit in offices area because confidential conversation is going on and I fully understand this culture; it also depends upon the individuals also. Later at night I got the War Diary and digest of service which is of great help in compilation of history. Net is not accessible, there are over a dozen peacock here and at evening almost invariably are in sun bathing mood, ducks, pigeons, hen and odd rooster are the other inhabitants of the mess, I was wondering about the very concept of freedom and liberty in relation to these animals and birds and to some extent it holds true for humans also. Tiger is my only link to the outside world, his calls are regular and I am grateful to him for such sincerity and friendship. Reena in America is a way to think modern, I at night wonder about my children and wife too apart from mother.

Well today Major Kaleem was back and it was a sigh of relief to see him, he is polite and courteous, also met Naik Sabz Ali he was on leave, I had met him in Miranshah, he is rather a rebel kind of clerk but very intelligent and have a genuine passion for history. Today in the morning I gave a

call to the colonel Mamoon at Bala Hisar but he was out of station, I have to make arrangements for move to Parachinar, thus I contacted Major Jawad in Qila, he was prompt in reply. I think I will be moving out and up north tomorrow, only issue is that I don't have the money to pay the mess bill, lets hope that ATM works here. I do feel sleepy and it is while working that I get this kind of feeling. I found my entry in the visitor book of Thall Scouts , it dates 11th July 1992 and we stayed here due to bad weather.

Tuesday 25th February.

Well it is almost 2000 hours and I am sitting in Thall mess ante room, one of the most comfortable sitting corner of all messes, a proper standing lamp, a sofa underneath and books on both side, classic in nature, most efficient system for studying and all credit goes to present commandant Colonel Salman, for whom I have developed a great respect. He is graceful in nature, calm and intelligent, I had a good conversation with him an hour ago in his office, I had completed the draft of Thall scouts. I wanted to leave for Parachinar but had to wait till tomorrow, it seems as if I will be missing next week classes also, let's hope. But the charm of frontier is overwhelming. Thall scouts media cell is another classic, very well managed and hi-tech in nature, Havildar Saeed and sepoy Ibrahim are the workforce of it. Today Pakistan is facing Sri Lanka in the Asia Cup match at Bangladesh, Pakistan under 19 time has already qualified for the final.

Wednesday 26th February 2014.

1600 hours, Chinar I, Guest room, Parachinar. Well I have finally reached here, it is cold, the field elevation of the mess is 5750 feet, there is no electricity, as per the attendant, an Afridi Amin kuki Khel, it comes only for an hour rest the generator supplies from 1800-2300 hours, same as in Tochi Valley. My room is grand , new construction, wooden side bars, double bed{of no use} attached changing room and washroom, it is fifty yards away from the main structure. I had a round of the mess, no doubt it is historic in nature, well kept, a series of rooms, an ante room, a billiard room, a bar with empty scotch bottles namely Jhonnie Walker, Teacher, few glasses brandishing Vat 69, a library with instruction snot to take away any book, walls are adorned with pictures, paintings most notable being two sketches by late Guljee, silver of last century, wooden floor on which I almost slipped, the skin of python; as far as I recall it was written that it was killed in Parachinar but now it says that it was killed by an officer in former East Pakistan. Had the lunch , like all other Frontier Corps messes they do not cook lunch , thus I had two kebabs and an omelette with a paratha, too oily and almost made me sick by the smell of the egg, rusty tea , but it is all what they had. These FC messes are good in making meat only and that too of mutton on charcoal, other than that it is very ordinary in taste. Within the mess, the pictures are quite historic, Sikander Mirza, the very first governor general of Pakistan, Field Marshall Ayub Khan in hunting gear, Zulfiqar Bhutto addressing a public gathering , he is standing in a crowd with natives rubbing shoulders with him so different from present day security environs. General Kayani, Ghulam Ishaq Khan President of Pakistan. In the old , the Lord Minto and Lady Minto, this picture catches my fancy because the caption under it is 'Lady Minto at Parachinar 1910, she is standing under an aircraft wing. I don't think that air service was in use in 1910, had to check it up. Library is small , no match to Chitral or Tochi, neither the books on area are available , the autobiography of Ross Keppel is not here and neither is my book on Tochi Scouts. Yet there are leather bound volumes which are rare and historic in nature. Heating arrangements are mostly based upon wood burning and every room have one of the sigri, even my guest room have one.

In the morning, I was at Thall Mess, rather let me go back to last night events, I got two calls , one from Lt Col Abid who is elder brother or brother in law of Omar in Kot Khizri, he complimented

me on my book, other was from my platoon mate Javed' Jeidi' which were nothing more than abuses, {this is how course mates talk}; I had cut a joke won him through another platoon mate Major General Mussarat and it was his reply to that. I have been working late, slept at 0100 hours, typing and typing the additional information I gathered through the War Diaries and other documents. I woke up with the wake up call of the rooster and then dozed off again, I was up by quarter to nine, had the morning tea and then again typed for an hour before I packed my things. Packing is still an enigma and dilemma despite all these years. Walked to the office area, I am adopting the backyard track, avoiding the Quarterguard, for the reason that they salute, which looks good to ear and soul but I am not authorised thus I avoid it in front. Adjutant was having a small Jirga with local thus I left the message and acme back to the mess, had my breakfast and then the wing commander of Kurram arrived, not very impressive in first sight . I went to bid farewell to the adjutant and also to pay the mess bill but he flatly refused to take it.

I sat with Lieutenant Colonel Adil, he is from 36 Frontier Force which was commanded by my platoon mate Brigadier Safdar , I also came to know that Adil is a sitara-i- jurat of Kargil and this changed my perspective about him, he is a war hero and as such I now see him in high esteem. Road is fantastic with beautiful scenery on both sides, the Afghan border runs quite close, in the vehicle , adil had jammers, radar detectors, weapons and so on, he briefed me about the area which unfortunately was not much of use but luckily he had been leading the operations thus I look forward to having useful interaction with him. Valley is broad, with Kurram river running almost within a shot range. At Arawali, which is another old fort and was under use of Thall Scouts also in 1997-98, fort had adjoining airstrip but the parking of aircraft is inside the fort. This fort is also similar to Thall Fort both in size and importance. Later I shifted to another vehicle which was under use of Lieutenant Colonel Javed who is also commanding a wing and his parent regiment is 38 Cavalry which was commanded by Colonel Wajahat Hamdani, Javed's elder brother had died in the PIA Fokker crash at Multan in 2006. A fine officer and I enjoyed the conversation with him, soon light drizzling started , scenery was eye catching, low clouds on far low hills, smooth road, green fields, neither there are any sharp bends on this segment nor much of traffic.

It is 1700 hours, I had another cup of tea, my fingers are getting numb due to cold and I have kept the door open to get some light, there are only two officers living in the mess, one is doctor who is also doing mess secretary and other is a subaltern Jawad, whom I just shook hand and then he has vanished, there is a Afghan hound also, probably a pet of an officer, black in colour and generally enjoying the life. Like other messes , here too are peacocks and other birds which I have not met so far , the pigeons are of grey colour and very fat, I don't think they can fly much far off with their present weight, the dog has just barked , a very short burst, which is neither of anger nor of love just a reminder of his presence. I just broke the sitting chair, it has collapsed not due to my weight but due to poor craftsmanship. The coming hours are dreadful, I have to do something to pass the time, one option is just to lie down on bed under a quilt other I cannot think of right now but I have to close the door now.

2130 hours. Well lights are on , so is heater, it is a new kind of heater like a pedestal fan with very bright orange light, I also had the wood burning in the fire place thus temperature is fine, I was going through the provincial gazetteer to find more about the Kurram and Parachinar which are invariably link with the names like Turi and Bangash. But the most amazing thing occurred for which I have no explanation, I was sitting rather lying in the bed under quilt, the Kuki Khel came and ask me for dinner which I had told him an hour ago to get the mix vegetables cook, he came with the tray and there was another person with him of middle age, I thought he is another waiter but I shook hand with him and ask his name, he mentioned Marker Zahid, I inquisitively ask him why this prefix of marker and he said he is the tennis marker and also for squash; ' I just heard your name and came to see, in

1985 there was an officer by the name of Aamir who used to come here, his regiment was deployed ahead of Parachinar' he replied. I was stunned, is he talking about me or was there another officer by the name of Aamir here in 1985, well I was here but I do not exactly recall whether I played squash here, I might have but his coming to the room was amazing, I offered him chair and also tea, I did not said that I am not that officer, rather I had conversation with him. His father also served as marker here in the mess for well over 52 years and only died in 1996, he himself has been reenrolled and is living in a house next to mess, his other brother is also serving in the mess as cook for well over forty years. I enquired about his qaum and he turns out to be a Turi. We talked about that era, I narrated him the incident when the two Mi-35 came and strafed Parachinar and he was also getting nostalgic about the past. I ask him to narrate me the oral history of his tribe.

He narrated that 'Turi are Turk{correct, same is written in gazetteer} and came from far off place, Hazrat Ali{moula Ali} infact sent us to come here, {nothing strange as Ali Masjid in Khyber have similar history}. The people came here on horses and had a camp not far from Parachinar, they send their horses for grazing but local did not cooperate, later natives misbehaved with the women of the camp who went to fetch the water and this is how the war or fight started, initially the natives were strong thus our forefathers used a long route via Kharlachi to attck the village and were successful, with passage of time we captured the valley'

I was impressed, because similar story I was reading in the book as well, he then narrated how his father used to paly with General Zia as caddie in golf and how he went to meet Zia at Rawalpindi, he was unable to meet him but Zia later sent him Rupees 5000/ which was a handsome amount in 1979, Zia had just imposed the martial law and was busy otherwise he would have met him. I was curious about Para-Chamkani qaum, and he updated me that these were living in hills and were enrolled by British but soon they deserted with weapons and as such British banned their enrolment in militia, now one platoon is recently enrolled in Kurram and other in Thall Scouts. He further said that when Bhutto came here, he was a kid but he remembers that Bhutto walked out of this gate,{pointing towards the gate outside}, I was sitting on the wall and waved him, he replied and his helicopter of white colour was parked there {yes Bhutto had a VIP Puma in white colour known as white elephant in army aviation}. I was dazed with the chain of events so far and we embrace each other and bid good night with a promise to meet next day. Waiter who came to collect the dinner was different, he said he is Ranizai, I was bit puzzled and he updated me that this tribe lives in Dir or Malakand, there are two platoons of them in Kurram Militia and he himself is in mess as waiter for last eighteen years.

History so far which I have read is fascinating, there is no authentic account but al point to the importance of Parachinar or Sadda as the seat of Karmin province which was established under Ghor Dynasty and remained as their stronghold for a century. Mongols and Turks came through this area, Humayun the Mughul emperor used this route for his invasion of India. Fact is that people and civilisation move and prosper along the water channels especially the movement is always downward, Kurram river takes birth just forty miles inside Afghanistan in Khost province and there fore all the invaders or caravans coming from Persia or Ghazna adopted this path, it is green as I saw today, fertile too and this lasts till Thall from where the Kurram river takes a south-westerly turn and is join by another river Kaitu which again originates from present day Afghanistan and both then traverse Bannu to join River Indus. Mengal as narrated by the Marker were afghans who were given protection by Turi and later more Mengal came in and this how the tension and unrest started in the valley.